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Thesis Statement

Miracle on Ice

As the countdown began at 10 seconds, the bench of college kids started to rise as did the pressure of the game lift from every person in the Olympic Center now known as Herb Brooks Arena. This situation is what made me fall in the love with the story of the 1980 Olympic ice hockey team. Five years ago my family and I took a vacation to Lake Placid in the winter. I was able to attend a practice of a local team in the same arena that the Americans defeated the once thought invincible USSR team. It was a humbling experience, me being a hockey player myself gives me a better understanding of the feat that the Americans reached. The movie “Miracle on Ice” gave the population of the US a better idea and the complete story of the teams’ achievements. The film, in my opinion, showed the preparation and dedication the young athletes of the American team willingly gave to their country and each other.

USA Hockey gave Coach Herb Brooks a chance to construct a team that would win the Olympics and overthrow the champions of hockey, the Soviets. Herb being a coach in college relied on athletes coming out or still in college, to use their speed and youth to beat the USSR. He held a tryout in Colorado for the Olympic team. In the movie “Miracle on Ice”, Herb already had his roster set before the tryout and picked players he thought that could be compatible. He overlooked many of the more talented players coming out of college, some he coached the previous year at the University of Minnesota. This action, which defined Brooks for the entire experience, outraged the members of the USA hockey committee. Standing firm to his decision, Brooks refused to change his mind about the roster.

Practice began, and it began rough for the young Americans. Brooks’s antics and coaching strategy left the players hating him more than hating the Soviets. He pushed the players to their brink scheduling early expedition games and skating till the players got sick. Herb Brooks knew that they key ingredient to beating the Soviets would be their strength of endurance. His famous quote from the movie was “Our legs will feed the wolves gentlemen”. No team before could stay with the soviets, in close games the Soviets would pull away in the ensuing minutes of the game by their incredible endurance. Herb Brooks believed in a tight knit group, they needed to pull together and become one to be the best. A few months into the teams’ construction captain Mike Eruzione began to decrease in intensity and the ability to finish his shots. Brooks needed to spark the team and get his captain back on track to lead the rest of the players to victory. Herb brought in a player that was thought to have a definite spot on the roster at the tryout in Colorado, but didn’t make the cut. The players disagreed with the decision but stayed quiet till a couple games with the new player. Before leaving the rink after a nighttime game, a few of the players stayed outside the bus to talk to the coach. They told him that he didn’t fit with the group, Herb tried to defend his case but the complaining players told him that they were a family and deserved to stay together. Herb Brooks cut the new player and a few others in later weeks to get the final roster of twenty.

Three days before the opening day of the Olympics Herb scheduled an expedition game against the Soviets in Madison Square garden. The Americans were defeated 10-3 in a horrid performance which injured a key player Jack O’Callahan, who torn a ligament in his knee (Wikipedia: Ice Hockey at the 1980 Olympic Games, 2009). The American team entered the Olympics and was put in the Blue Division with teams like Sweden, Czech, Romania, West Germany, and Norway. The Americans tied their first game with Sweden 2-2. Herb was very upset with the performance of his players, telling them they weren’t good enough to be here and were too young. Their next game on Feb 16 was against Czech which they won handedly by a score of 7-3. They cruised through their next game against the weak Romanians 7-2. The Americans were gaining confidence with their play improving and their country supporting. The Soviets at the head of the red division were also cruising blowing out their first two opponents and winning two other games by more than two goals. With the entry of the medal round came back the player of Jack O’Callahan.

Feb 22, 1980 a day that would be forever remembered in the world of sports. The game started with a whole nation in front of their TVs watching and hoping that a miracle could happen. The Americans were underdogs, but they were competitive. With the Cold War raging in the east, the game was called the Cold War “showdown”. The Soviets took the initiative by scoring on a deflected shot by Aleskei Kasatonvo to take the lead. The Americans answered a score of there own by Buzz Schneider. The momentum transferred back over to the red machine after another goal by Sergei Makarov. In the time before the next period Jim Craig took the game into his hands after turning away many of the Soviets shots. The shot count at the end of the game was favored heavily on the Soviet side, outshooting the Americans 39 to 16. In the waning seconds of the first period, Dave Christian fired a slap shot on Tretiak. The Soviet goalie saved the shot but misplayed the rebound, and Mark Johnson scooped it past the goaltender to tie the score with one second left in the period. At the beginning the of the second period the world’s best goaltender, Tretiak, was found sitting on the bench. Some of the Soviets players in interviews years later said that the decision was “Coach Crazy”. Only one goal was scored for the Soviets in the second period in which the USSR capitalized on a power play. With 8:39 left in the game, Johnson scored again firing a loose puck past the new goalie Myhskin to tie the game at 3-3. In a couple shifts the captain of the USA team Mike Eruzione was left undefended in the high slot. Eruzione fired a shot passed Myshkin through the legs of a defenseman to take the lead with exactly 10 minutes left in the game. This part in the game in some people’s minds is when Jim Craig took the game under his control. He repelled many of the soviets shots, as the soviets panicked to score to tie the game. All the Americans had to do was hold off the Soviets for 10 minutes and they would accomplish the impossible. The stadium started the countdown as did Al Michaels who was calling the game on ABC; he picked up the countdown in his broadcast, and delivered his famous call, “Eleven seconds, you've got ten seconds, the countdown going on right now! Morrow, up to Silk. Five seconds left in the game. Do you believe in miracles? YES!” The game ended, and the Americans did the impossible. The Americans continued the make history as the defeated Finland 4-2 to claim the Gold Medal and Immortality…

For me as a hockey player this story of miracles makes me very proud to play this sport. This game, those moments, were some of the greatest in any sporting event ever to take place in the history of recorded athletics. I wrote about this topic because it was during a time of war and our country was lacking a sort of patriotism. I thought this game brought some hope back into America, that a young group of kids could take down the worlds most elite. This story, to me, is truly a miracle and I think it was very important to this decade.